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## Citizenship application backlog holding up disability benefits

**By Lornet Turnbull**

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

Adil Rikabi began receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits shortly after arriving in the United States as a refugee from Iraq in 1998, an injured right leg the result of gunshot wounds he suffered during that country's decadelong war with Iran.

The father of four had hoped to find work in his new country. But Rikabi, 45, suffers a physical imbalance — his right leg, two centimeters shorter than his left, causes him to collapse if he tries to stand too long.

In 2004, when he was eligible, he applied to become a U.S. citizen, a status he believed would open doors to more and different kinds of jobs and, if not, allow him to continue receiving the \$623 a month his family depended on.

But three years later, Rikabi is still waiting — among hundreds of thousands of immigrants throughout the country whose citizenship applications are held up by FBI security checks, bogged down in a backlog that could take years to clear up.

Most have otherwise met all the requirements for citizenship but have yet to be cleared for swearing in. Among them are disabled or elderly refugees like Rikabi, who, because of the delay, have lost their SSI benefits.

The delays most often affect applicants with common names or names outside the Roman alphabet.

U.S. Rep. Jim McDermott, D-Wash., has scheduled a hearing today to explore a fix that might be fair.

"Those who come to our country as refugees are coming from really awful situations, sometimes with nothing more than the clothes on their backs," McDermott said. "We take them in with the promise of the American Dream and then say to them, 'We're not going to help you, do it yourself.'"

The benefits Rikabi had been receiving are available for the most part only to immigrants who come



MARK HARRISON / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Adil Rikabi, center, his wife, Wafaa, right, and their four children get by on government cash assistance, food stamps and the kindness of strangers.



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The Rikabi family watches Iraqi television in its Everett living room. From left are Zainab, 11, Amir, 11, Adil, Hanen, 7, and Watah, 17.

to the U.S. as refugees and then only in their first seven years here.

For the benefits to continue beyond that, recipients must become citizens, a process that for most immigrants can't begin until after they have lived in the U.S. at least five years.

The SSI cuts have hit hard in Washington state, where 340 disabled or elderly refugees already have lost benefits. Only Florida, California and New York have higher numbers.

Rikabi, who was cut from SSI last year, is among 15 Puget Sound-area immigrants who last year sued the government over the delay. He and two others — all of them Middle Eastern — are still waiting for their names to be cleared so that they can be sworn in as citizens.

"I understand about security and the caution after Sept. 11," he said through an interpreter. "But a name check taking two years in a country this advanced doesn't seem right. I've lost my excitement for becoming a citizen."

The delays are rooted in myriad factors including increases in citizenship applications and lengthy background checks put in place after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) asked the FBI to add name checks to the fingerprint and background work it was already doing on citizenship applicants.

The FBI said CIS requests have outpaced its available resources.

Bob Gibbs, a Seattle immigration attorney, said that even after the FBI clears someone's name, the process might get bogged down at CIS.

"It has turned into bureaucratic finger-pointing between the agencies," he said. "Name check becomes the excuse du jour for not getting the thing done."

About 700,000 immigrants were naturalized last year. Ninety-nine percent go through without a hitch, CIS spokeswoman Sharon Rummery said.

Still, federal-court dockets from Philadelphia to Seattle are clogged with lawsuits from people trapped by delays — immigrants who need citizenship so they can bring a wife or children to the U.S. or secure the ease of travel that comes with having a U.S. passport.

Other, like the Rikabis, simply want to keep the benefits they depend on to survive.

With four children between the ages of 8 and 17, the family survives on \$840 in monthly cash assistance from the government, \$700 of which goes to pay the rent on their Everett home.

They receive \$600 a month in food stamps and depend on the kindness of strangers to help make ends meet.

Rikabi said the SSI money that was cut last year went a long way in helping to buy gas for the car and an occasional trip to Chuck E. Cheese's on a child's birthday.

Many places won't hire him because of his disability, he said. His wife struggles with depression and

doesn't work. Neither of them speaks English very well.

"I talk to my family at home, and they don't believe me when I tell them about the delay," he said.

"They think I must have committed some crime, when the truth is I've never even had a traffic ticket."

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